

October 12, 2025

SACRIFICIAL SERVICE, HUMILITY, AND THE COST OF FOLLOWING CHRIST

Mark 9:30-50

(22 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

When I teach our new members' class and get to the section covering the church covenant, I usually take some time to explain exactly what a church covenant is. After all, though most churches had covenants and had members sign them for much of church history, that practice largely died out in the middle of the twentieth century. And when I explain it, I usually say that it's a parallel document to a church's statement of faith. The statement of faith is simply of what we believe the Bible teaches that we must believe. And so I say, "Likewise, a church covenant is simply a summary of how we believe the Bible commands us to live."

Now, if that's true, and if our church covenant is filled with our commitment to love one another with brotherly affection, rejoice with one another, bear one another's sorrows, serve one another, pray for one another, and on and on, doesn't it highlight how much the Bible demands that we orient our lives toward others? In other words, if we strive for holiness by obeying the Bible, then we simply cannot pursue holiness without constantly considering others.

That's quite clear when we read Paul's letters. For example, in the text we heard read earlier from Romans 12, the Bible commands us to love one another with brotherly affection, contribute to the needs of the saints, show hospitality, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and outdo one another in showing honor—all commands for which it is impossible to obey if you are isolated from others. But this reality didn't simply come about in Paul's letters. Rather, Paul was reflecting something that Jesus had made clear in the days of his ministry and specifically when he taught his disciples what it meant to follow him. And it's hard to think of a text where that is more clearly seen than the one we're looking at this morning: Mark 9:30-50.

Mark 9:30-50 contains the second of three times when Jesus explicitly foretells his suffering, death, and resurrection. We saw the first back in chapter 8, and we'll see the next in chapter 10. For that reason, I noted a few weeks back that we were at a transition point in Mark's gospel where, having established who Jesus is, Mark turns his focus to what Jesus does to redeem us, specifically focusing on Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. But what is interesting, and what I hope to show you this morning, is that each of these three occasions where Jesus foretells his upcoming death and resurrection focuses on what it looks like to follow Jesus as his disciples. In other words, each time Jesus predicts his death, he takes an opportunity to show his disciples what is required to follow him. So that's what I want to show us this morning. What is it that we must do in order to be faithful disciples of Jesus? First, we must live in light of Christ's redeeming work for us.

We must live in light of Christ's redeeming work for us

What I mean is that if we're going to be faithful followers of Jesus, then we've got to recognize that we're following one who willingly gave himself over to a hideous death in order that we might be forgiven and have life. And if that's who we're following, we shouldn't be surprised at the demand to give ourselves for others. But before going too far with that, let me show why I think Mark is showing us that, as followers of Christ, we must live in light of Christ's redeeming work for us.

First, we see in verses 30-32 that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. He straightforwardly says, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise" (v. 31). And then Mark mentions that they didn't understand him and were afraid to ask. They simply didn't have a category for the conquering Messiah being killed. Moreover, they believed in the coming resurrection, but they would have struggled to think of Jesus being raised all by himself. The reason they were afraid to ask, I imagine, is because they didn't want to expose their thick-headedness again.

But what's key for us to see is that each time Jesus mentions his upcoming death and resurrection in these middle chapters of Mark, it follows a specific pattern, always culminating in what is required of one who would follow him as his disciple. Here's the pattern: 1) Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection, 2) an expression of pride or self-interest by the disciples, and 3) teaching on humility and the self-sacrificial demand of discipleship from Jesus.¹

Note this pattern first in the two other texts where Jesus predicts his death. One chapter earlier, in Mark 8:31, we were told that Jesus began to teach his disciples that he'd suffer, be killed, and after three days rise again. Then, we have the expression of pride or self-interest as Peter takes it upon himself to rebuke Jesus (v. 33). And then in verses 34-38 we have Jesus teaching on humility and the self-sacrificial nature of following Jesus as he tells them they must take up their cross and be willing to lose their lives to follow him. That's the first episode where Jesus foretells his death and resurrection.

Similarly, if we go to chapter 10, we find the third occasion where we see this pattern. In verses 32-34 Jesus tells them explicitly for a third time that he'll suffer, die, and be raised after three days. Then, we see the expression of pride or self-interest by the disciples in verses 35-41 as James and John request to be seated in places of honor in Jesus' kingdom, and the other ten get angry—probably that they hadn't thought of this themselves. And finally, we see Jesus' teaching on humility and the self-sacrificial nature of following him in verses 42-45 as he tells them that they must serve, even as he came to give his life for them.

Finally, looking at our text, which is the second time Jesus foretells his upcoming death and resurrection, we see that it is followed by an expression of pride and self-interest by the disciples as they start arguing over who is the greatest and express their desire to be an exclusive group of those who follow Jesus (which we'll dive into shortly), and then it is followed by Jesus teaching

¹ This has been pointed out by Mark Strauss in *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 403.

them about serving others, rejoicing in others, and offering their lives as holy sacrifices to the Lord.

Therefore, here's my reasoning in light of this pattern. If each prediction of Jesus' death leads to teaching about what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus, following and obeying him, then I think it shows us that Jesus' death must impact how we live. Or, to say it as I've noted, we must live as Jesus' disciples in light of his redeeming work. Any time we ask what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus, we must start by reminding ourselves of what Jesus did for us—suffering, dying, and being raised so that we might live. That's our starting point, our compass, and guide for what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. His redeeming work must always be that which orients us toward what holy living looks like.

So, if we're taking our cues from one who served us by laying down his life for us, then you won't find it surprising to see that following Jesus requires that we serve even those who can offer us nothing.

We must serve even those who can offer us nothing

If I were to ask us what is required to follow Jesus, I don't know how many of us would answer, "Serving others." But Jesus makes quite clear that this is the case. Note how he does so in these verses.

Jesus has announced his upcoming death and resurrection as they were walking, and so once they get to Capernaum Jesus asks them what they were discussing on the way? But instead of answering, they're silent. The reason for their silence, no doubt, was because they were a bit embarrassed because Mark tells us that they had been arguing with each other about which of them was the greatest (v. 34)—hardly a topic that you'd think would naturally follow your leader's report that he was about to suffer and die.

But Jesus knows the topic, and he seizes the opportunity to talk to them about what the pursuit of greatness must look like if you're going to be his follower. First, he declared, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35). Then, Mark tells us, "he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me'" (vv. 36-37).

What is Jesus getting at by telling his disciples to receive one such as this child in his name? Well, there are all kinds of realities people think of when we think of children. Some think of innocence, or being dependent and needy, or the like. But I think the image Jesus is going for has to do with the topic the disciples were arguing about, namely, status or rank.

You see, in that culture, rank in society was something that was thought about often. We've already seen that with the disciples arguing which of them was the greatest, and we'll see it again in the next chapter when James and John request to have the rank in Jesus' kingdom of sitting on

his right and left hand. But in this system of ranking, you couldn't get lower than a child. Even slaves ranked higher than children. Therefore, within a society that focuses on rank and honor, you can imagine the temptation to try to cozy up to someone who might elevate your rank. One might think, "If I can serve this high ranking man, for example, then he will be in a position to aid and elevate me." In other words, you give so you can get.

Well, a child in this society would not have invited that temptation. If you served a child, then there was nothing he could do for you. He would be in no position to exalt you and elevate your standing in society. It got you nothing. It would have to be driven by a desire to sacrificially love another. And I think that's the point Jesus is making. He's saying to his disciples that if they really want to pursue greatness, then they need commit themselves to sacrificially serving others. They must not see service as a mere vehicle through which we might be elevated but as that which characterizes us. Like our Savior who gave himself for us, we must be characterized by a willingness to give ourselves in service to others—even the lowest in society.

Now, before we move on, let's make sure we receive this. After all, this isn't what it looks like to be a super-Christian. This is what it looks like to be a Christian. We must be characterized by a self-denying commitment to serve others. But that's not all, Jesus also shows us that we must rejoice in the labors of others for Christ's sake.

We must rejoice in the labors of others for Christ's sake

It may be more helpful to say this negatively: we must not rejoice only in labors we do for Christ's sake but also those done by others. And I say that because that's what we find the disciples doing in our next section. In verse 38 John comes to Jesus to inform him that they had seen someone not among the twelve casting out demons in Jesus' name, and so they tried to stop him, but he wouldn't stop. And Jesus answers by telling John not to stop such a one, saying, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward" (vv. 39-41).

This idea makes sense if you consider that Jesus and his followers are going to be the objects of hostility and persecution. If Jesus and his followers are going to be persecuted and hated by many, then someone who does a mighty work in Jesus' name probably won't be speaking ill of Jesus the next day and attacking his followers. So, don't look at them as against you. Similarly, if someone is willing to bless a believer because he's a follower of Christ with a cup of water in such an environment, that one will be blessed.

But the main issue here seems to be John's impulse to stop this person from casting out demons in Jesus' name. Why would John (and the others, notice he says "we") order this man to stop doing that? It's certainly not because he wants demons to continue tormenting people. It seems that it's because the twelve longed to have this position and power exclusively. That is, they wanted good things to happen, but they wanted them to happen through their own hands. They

wanted them to happen as long as they were in position to get glory. In other words, the impulse here is quite similar to that which had them arguing with one another about who was the greatest.

Now, before condemning them too strongly, perhaps we should make sure we don't have this beam in our own eyes. It might be helpful to ask if we find ourselves thinking similarly to John and the others here. Do we find ourselves getting excited about good things being done in the Lord's name only when we do them? When others are involved in great works in Christ's name and for his honor, are we ever gripped with envy instead of rejoicing? Worse yet, do we ever secretly root for another not to have great success, even when Christ would receive honor, because we'd like that glory to only exclusively come our way? Brothers and sisters, that must not be our stance. Paul was a model here. When he was in prison, writing to the Philippians, and some were preaching Christ out of envy (maybe even taking digs at Paul while they did it), his response was simply to rejoice that Christ was preached. May that be us. As John the Baptist said, we must decrease and Christ must increase. That must be the heart of a disciple of Jesus. Not only must we seek to serve others, but we must also be eager to rejoice when the Lord works through them—even if we don't see the Lord working by the same measure in us. A disciple of Christ cannot follow him while seeking to gain glory. But there's one more thing we must note: we must earnestly pursue holiness in ourselves and others.

We must earnestly pursue holiness in ourselves and others

Often, when we think of holiness, we probably think of focusing merely on ourselves. But Jesus won't allow his followers to do that. Again, he died to make others holy, and so his followers must desire the holiness of others as well. Therefore, Jesus starts this last section by giving a strong warning against causing another to sin. He declares, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea" (v. 42).

Now, for clarification, though Jesus has just made reference to children, I don't think he's talking about merely causing children to sin—though you shouldn't do that. I think he's talking about causing fellow believers to sin, though he may have in mind especially those believers who are viewed as lowly and insignificant. The reason I say that is because he specifically identifies these little ones as those "who believe in me."

My guess is that Jesus brings this up because it's a natural contrast with what he's just said. One is blessed if they choose to bless a believer with a cup of water. But on the other hand, it would be terrible if one causes a believer to sin and walk away from Christ, and we must expect judgment accordingly. Therefore, we must make sure that there's nothing we do that would lead another to sin, to give in to unbelief, and to fall away from following the Lord. Jesus gives a hideous picture of drowning with a stone tied to your neck as preferable to what Christ would do toward those who lead others to sin.

Now, perhaps this feels obvious and not convicting. I mean, what are we going to do, start telling each other to steal, murder, and the like? Of course not. However, there may be areas where we have blindspots. For example, and I'll put this on the young men, if you're in a dating relationship where you're practicing sexual immorality, leading a daughter of your Heavenly Father to sin, then stop and read verse 42 a few times. Or, as parents, if we carelessly give our children smartphones without any guards, we too might need to meditate on that verse. As believers, we must do all we can do to help others walk in holiness. And also, we need to go to extreme measures to make sure we're practicing holiness as well.

In verses 43-48 Jesus tells us to cut off our hand, cut off our foot, and tear out our eye if they cause us to sin. Now, he's not being literal. If that were the case, we'd all need to mutilate ourselves. Moreover, sadly, we can pluck out our eyes and still sin, calling lustfully to mind what we've seen prior to plucking our eyes out. So Jesus isn't being literal. But that doesn't mean he isn't saying we should do something drastic. He is. He's telling us that we must take whatever measures are necessary, even if they feel radical, to ensure that we walk in holiness. If your smartphone causes you to sin, get a dumb one. If your heart is filled with covetousness, try to give even more sacrificially. If you're envious of another, start praying for them daily and encouraging them as you can. In other words, make war with sin—in your own life and by making sure you're not hindering holiness in the lives of others as well. After all, as Jesus reminds us, it is better to make sacrifices for holiness in this life than to give ourselves over to sin and face eternal judgment in hell.

Now, the last two verses are tricky as Jesus uses the images of salt and fire. The start of verse 50 makes sense, reiterating what we've just said. If salt represents the holiness that makes Christians distinct, then to lose our saltiness (i.e. to live an unholy life) is to lose the very essence of who we must be. And he ends by reminding us that holiness is personal and corporate, as he notes our being at peace with one another. But what does he mean by everyone will be salted with fire? Well, it seems the image points us to the fiery trials we'll face, and Jesus is reminding us that these are to the end of making us holy.

But the theme of the entire section is clear. We have a Savior who suffered, died, and was raised for us—so that we might be holy. Therefore, if we're going to follow him, we must serve others as he served us. We must love others to rejoice in their Christ-honoring labors even as our Lord loves and rejoices in us. And we must pursue holiness in ourselves and prize it in others, even as he died and was raised to make us a holy people. May God grant us the grace to walk in these ways as a church. Let's ask for that grace now as we come to the table. Amen.